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The Leak That Was



Mark Rosewater

Pilfered, premature, and painful

It's Saturday night, and you and your significant other are at a movie. As you nibble on your overpriced, pseudobutter - buttered popcorn, you lean back in your chair and the lights slowly dim. After the annoying commercials, the trailers begin. The first scene flickers on the screen and you realize that this is a new trailer for a movie you're dying to see. Your adrenaline starts to rise as the images fill your retinas. And in just three minutes, they manage to give away every important plot point in the movie.

You've just been robbed. In nine months you were planning to plunk down a little under ten dollars for an exciting movie experience. You'll still plunk down your money, but now you're not getting as much. The people who made the trailer stole some future happiness from you. And there really wasn't much you could do about it.



Now, you have to understand, I'm not anti-trailer. I believe a good trailer will whet your appetite for the upcoming movie. A good trailer will build your expectations and get you pumped to see the movie. A good trailer adds to the movie experience. What I'm complaining about here is the bad trailer. The one that tells you more than you want to know. The one that doesn't add to, but rather subtracts from, the movie you will eventually see.

Why do I bring up this subject in my Making Magic column? Because today I'm going to address the same phenomenon that happens in **Magic: The Gathering** -- the phenomenon known as the leak.

Taking a Leak

Several months ago, Kyle Murray, one of the **Magic** brand managers, wrote an excellent [article](#) explaining why Wizards of the Coast doesn't acknowledge the existence of particular leaks. (If you haven't read Kyle's article, I urge you to do so.) In short, Kyle explained Wizards policy concerning leaks: No comment. We don't talk about leaks, because if we do, we would only further establish their authenticity (good or bad).

I'm not going to focus on any particular leak; instead, I'm going to talk about leaks in general. My message is this: We at Wizards do not like unauthorized leaks. Why? For exactly the reasons I listed above. Part of what we sell is the mystery of the new set. We consider the adrenaline rush of opening a booster pack and discovering new cards part of what you get when you buy **Magic** cards.

I'm sure the above statement will lead to a number of questions, so let me help by answering many of the biggest questions now.

If you don't like leaks, why does Wizards (through MagicTheGathering.com, Sideboard.com, ads, and various other means) leak cards?

I didn't say we don't like leaks. I said we don't like *unauthorized* leaks. As I stated in my movie trailer metaphor, I believe small controlled leaks to be beneficial. We want to whet the audience's

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appetite, not give everything away.

We spend a great deal of time here at Wizards figuring out which cards we want to preview. We purposely pick ones that demonstrate the new elements of the set without showing what we believe to be all the best cards. And we release the information at a rate that allows the players time to savor each nugget. On the other hand, most people who leak sets start by giving away the "good stuff." Rosebud's the sled; he's dead, but he doesn't know it; Vader's his father; Verbal is Kaiser Soze; and she dies half way through the movie in the shower scene. In just a few short posts, leaks give everything away.

Does this mean you don't like sites that leak information about upcoming sets?

The Internet is about information. If information exists, there will be websites listing that information. My problem isn't with the sites. My problem is with the people who provide information to the sites. If Wizards of the Coast (or one of our many international distributors) hasn't given you permission to reveal inside information, then you are doing something illegal. You are giving away Wizards of the Coast's intellectual property. Beyond that, you are doing something that is hurting other players.

This is an important point, so I want to stress it -- I think that most people who leak information *believe* they are doing good. There's an eager audience who wants information on upcoming **Magic** expansions, so the leakers think they are simply providing a wanted service. What they fail to understand is that they are indirectly hurting the people who don't want the information. (More on this in a minute.)

Please understand that there are a lot of legitimate pieces of information out there, and we're honored that people care enough to create sites to collect that information. It's great that there are people who take the limited information we do give and find ways to extract additional information from it. In fact, we created the Orb of Insight because we wanted to give the public a way to figure out pieces of information for themselves.

The message today is not one of condemning **Magic** sites that collect information. We're very happy they exist. Those sites are signs of **Magic**'s health. There are many game companies that would kill to get the online coverage from fan sites that we get. We are very, very appreciative. Please don't take today's column as any kind of sleight. My comments today are directed at the sources of the leaks, not the press that reports them. I do want take a minute though to applaud the sites that have chosen to reject printing unauthorized leaks. It's nice to see that others share our concerns.

Can't people that don't want to know about upcoming sets just not look?

This is a common defense of leaks. Finding out about sets requires someone to be proactive (they have to go look at sites that leak the info), so what's the problem? The people that enjoy it can enjoy it and those that don't can simply refrain from looking. The problem with this presumption is twofold.

First, information can't be contained easily. For example, let's say a set is leaked on a news website. Other **Magic** sites link to it. Then other Internet writers reference the new information in their articles. So now, you can learn information simply by visiting a random **Magic** site or clicking on a link to an interesting article. Players who don't want to know, but who do want to be able to read about **Magic** on the Web, are exposed to the information accidentally. This problem then spreads to the real world. Once a person knows, he or she tells other people. So even someone who refuses to read the Internet can still be exposed to these leaks.

Second, people are drawn to the unknown. Many players who don't really want to know might still take a peek. Whether it's curiosity or just a desire to know what their friends know, players will be tempted to do something they'll later regret. Quite often after a leak, I'll see posts on sites from people bemoaning the fact that they know everything about the set. Just because someone doesn't have to look doesn't mean he or she won't. Temptation is a cruel mistress.



If surprise is so important to you, why do you run Prereleases?



We run Prereleases because the surprise factor is important. Players want the opportunity to open up new cards and play with them. In addition, they like doing so where they can share their excitement with other players experiencing the same thing.

How do we know this? We spend a lot of time collecting data, and all our data shows that players value the Prerelease experience. Prereleases are the best-attended tournaments we run. Also, interesting to note, there is a correlation between leaks and Prerelease attendance: When the set is prematurely leaked, attendance goes down.

As Prereleases are sanctioned events, numerous players feel that we need to release the card set ahead of time to even the playing field. I believe this is false on two accounts. First, the real imbalance is when a set is leaked since then some players know the entire set while others know nothing. Second, the skill set being tested by the prerelease is the ability to gauge cards on the fly. The less that's known about the card set, the better this skill is tested. Having tested Pro

Tour players on this ability set at the Invitational (I often throw homemade cards into the mix), I can attest that it requires a great deal of skill.

Is this just about money?

So what's my motivation for writing this column? Is there a financial element? Sure. Wizards is in the business of selling **Magic** and leaks have some negative impact (although not a huge amount).

To me this is an issue of pride. Wizards does have a plan to earn a lot of money long term. Our plan is to make our consumers as happy as we can for as long as we can. We're in this for the long game. To accomplish this, we focus a great deal of our energy on product quality. If we make a great product then you'll be happy to buy it. But we go beyond this: We don't just want to create a great product; we want to create a great environment.

R&D (and Wizards in general) spends countless hours enhancing the **Magic** metagame (defined as the culmination of all aspects of the game -- playing, trading, building decks, chatting about **Magic**, and so on). The creation of **MagicTheGathering.com**, for instance, was motivated by this desire. As such, we are very proud of the work we do. So, it personally pains me when our work is lessened because individuals with ill-gotten information take it upon themselves to decide what the public should and shouldn't know.

Leak in Review


I'd like to end today's column by talking to the leakers themselves. **Magic** is a game of exploration. Many players take great joy in not knowing what they'll find when they open new packs. When you post information, you are doing so at the expense of others. Your actions ripple and affect thousands of other people. Please think about this before you decide to take away the mystery from the next expansion.

That's it for this week. I hope I've given you all something to think about. Join me next week when I explore **Magic's** comic relief.

Until then, may you crack a pack containing cards you know nothing about.

Mark Rosewater

Mark may be reached at makingmagic@wizards.com.

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